

Buckfastleigh

Interview with Pam Barrett – former Mayor (for 3 years) of Buckfastleigh, South Devon by Peter Andrews November 2018

Quotable quotes from Pam

“Ask yourself and others ‘what is the point of your council?’”

‘The way town councils operate is so unnecessarily convoluted and bureaucratic that it takes an extraordinary effort to get things done. Trying to make sense of it is the hardest thing I have done and it is not unsurprising that most town councils just carry on without outdated practices and procedures. However it is utterly worthwhile and now there is a network of help and advice that makes things much more manageable’

Buckfastleigh Background

Buckfastleigh is a Town Council with a population of 3800 and a council with 12 seats. Prior to the 2015 election they had not had an election for at least 20 years. All the councillors had been co-opted.

The council is controlled by Buckfastleigh Independent Group (BIG) which is not registered as a political party

There is 35% measurable level of child poverty – no real service provision from County or district except rubbish collection

Buckfastleigh Independent Group (BIG) back story

A group of residents, friends and colleagues had been thinking about standing for the council for some months. These thoughts arose out of a series of frustrations about the lack of action of the existing council over a number of issues - for example the proposed closure of the swimming pool, lack of response to the floods in 2012, proposals to dump incinerator bottom ash in the town and a range of other cuts in local services and activities.

The group felt that the council hadn't taken any effective steps to work with the community on any of these issues and in some cases had even worked against those trying to take some action. With constant cuts and loss of services the team felt that the council should and could be more active in trying to protect the community and help it make the most of the things that make it special.

Some of the group had tried to get co-opted onto the council but were turned down. The council even left seats vacant rather than appoint people associated with the group.

Pam commented that this point that now she could understand why things weren't happening – because in her words 'it was bloody hard'.

They looked at various routes to move these issues along including forming a community council but in the end decided that they would have more legitimacy by being elected as councillors and taking control of the council. They also realise that being a council opened other opportunities – eg tax raising powers, employing staff or raising money through organisations like the Public Works Loan Board. (check this)

Importantly they also thought that with their proposition the council was winnable.

The 2015 elections 9 BIG candidates stood and all 9 were elected and took control of the council.

What has happened since then?

The first thing to recognise is that Buckfastleigh Council had a capitation of only £64K

BIG held meetings at which they explained to the residents what money there was and said where it goes. They then gave people a choice - to continue to pay nothing and not get much - or pay more and get more services. They then set out 8 projects – how much each would cost and gave the public the choice of doing any, some or all –overwhelmingly people said they would pay more and get on and do them all

The proportion of the council tax relevant to Buckfastleigh was raised 97% which in real terms meant an average increase per household from £1 per week to £1.97 but actually doubled the town's income from 64K to 140K.

They then ring-fenced various pots of money to the below grouping of activities – with the relevant groups saying what they want to happen with the money

- a) Youth– (the funding had been cut by 100%)
- b) Older people
- c) Growers, gardeners and food related activities
- d) Arts, musicians

It has proved throughout that established community groups are critical to delivering services, though sometimes they needed handholding to get in place the right structures in order to deliver whatever it is more effectively.

They have demystified the council and streamlined procedure. They have upped the level of engagement with the community – especially by encouraging participation in council meetings and using more effective communications to let people know what is happening. BIGs communication strategy was their first major change especially using social media and posters much more.

A couple of practical examples

The council paid to bring a citizen advice centre back to town this in turn bought 120K extra funding to Buckfastleigh in benefits all for £3.5K investment.

Hello Summer which provided free activity for kids over the summer.

Throughout BIG have realised that lack ambition has been the main reason for stuff not happening

Did the Flatpack Democracy concept influence your thinking?

When B I G set out on their journey they had not read Flatpack Democracy but subsequently heard about it and plan bought 10 copies which she distributed to potential councillors and left around the town. Pam felt it was a very useful however in her view the main problem was not party politics. In small rural councils this is not often the real barrier. It's more about just carrying on with a traditional approach, doing what they have always done, combined with a lack of ambition, direction and no clear sense of purpose.

What do you think are the strong and weak and points of the Flatpack process?

Strong - gave confidence to BIG that they could do this and could achieve significant change.

Helped with the process of demystify council procedure.

Weak – the concentration on party politics and need more on management of council.

Ways of Working – have you used them or a similar process, and with what outcome?

BIG didn't adopt any WoWs – they all decided they knew each other well enough. However looking back Pam would strongly advise the adoption a WOW.

What are your top hints, tips or observations?

Be prepared for a shift in dynamic in public thinking – 'we have elected you now get on with it.'

Put successionist policies in place – so when people step down or burn out there are others ready to take over.

Be prepared for a lot of negative comment and lots of shit stirring from the old established order.

Framework for National Association of Local Council NALC not supportive enough – Buckfastleigh have their cancelled subscription.

Established community groups are critical to delivering service but may need professional help or support.

When in power be clear in your communications and early on sort out mechanisms for continuing dialogue with your communities. Facebook is particularly useful.

If people wont come to meetings go to theirs

In power – be brave – spend money in your reserves – tell community about finances.

In Buckfastleigh the voters wanted the council to deliver activities services – step in to gap by vacuum created by withdrawing central and county funding. This is the opposite to Frome where the voters wanted the council to act as facilitators.

Bear in mind that voters in many areas have become so disenfranchised they really don't know what they want.

Don't be afraid of the fact that the educated middleclass are often the initial driving force behind change. – but their role should be to flatten the structures and processes so that everyone can understand what is happening and take part if that is what they want to do.

Finally Pam said that running a council is a complicated business and as a small institution they did not have the finances to pay for specialist help – say in the legal or financial field She would like to see templates created as models for other council to follow.

Peter Macfayen is quoted as saying, 'just do it – who is going to stop you'